

DAN GURAVICH (1918–1997)



Dan Guravich and a 3-month-old polar bear cub in April 1986.

When Dr. Daniel A. Guravich died on 30 December 1997, the Arctic lost a true champion. As biologist, conservationist, and wildlife photographer, Guravich worked miracles in alerting the world to its Arctic heritage and popularizing the unique wildlife of the Far North. As a biologist, Guravich knew and understood the nature of the animals, such as polar bears, which became his specialty. As a conservationist, he sought to persuade others to preserve the Arctic environment and its unique creatures. As a photographer, he created extraordinary images, which were largely responsible for the current popularity of polar bears among young and old.

Curiously, Guravich never saw a wild polar bear until 1969, when he was 51 years old. He was traversing the Northwest Passage as the official photographer on board the S.S. *Manhattan*, an ice-breaking tanker sent to test the practicality of a sea route through which crude oil might be shipped from Alaska's newly discovered Prudhoe Bay field. On the sea ice, he saw a magnificent animal that riveted his attention. That the world's largest land-based carnivore could live and prosper in what seemed a lifeless environment captured his interest. As the bear turned and shuffled away, Guravich resolved to photograph and publish images of wild polar bears in their natural surroundings.

As a Canadian by birth and a scientist by education, Guravich had contacts in the Canadian Wildlife Service and Canada Parks Service. He discovered from Canadian biologists that polar bears were known to congregate each fall in the vicinity of Churchill, Manitoba, on the western shore of Hudson Bay.

However, finding subjects presented less difficulty than persuading cautious editors to assign him an article about polar bears. No one had ever done such a thing. Finally, the *Smithsonian Magazine* accepted his proposal, allowing Guravich to travel to Churchill with writer Jack Wiley to report on the polar bear phenomenon there. Their article,

published in February 1978, generated such a flood of interest that the influential magazine published a follow-up piece in 1986.

In the meantime, writers, photographers, and television film crews from Japan, Great Britain, Germany, and the United States began showing up in Churchill. The *National Geographic* team arrived, along with representatives of lesser periodicals. They were joined by tourists and amateur photographers as well. Soon, Churchill began billing itself as the polar bear capital of the world, and a tourism infrastructure developed to handle the crowds. In time, thousands of visitors would annually pump millions of dollars into the economy of this small, impoverished community.

In 1978, Guravich traveled to Churchill with a writing partner, the late Richard Davids, to collect materials for a book called *Lords of the Arctic*. (When published by Macmillan in 1982, it quickly became a bestseller.) In Churchill, Guravich and Davids rented a car from Len Smith, a local businessman and outdoorsman, who took them to see the bears.

A better vehicle for bear viewing was needed, Guravich decided. He suggested a polar version of the swamp buggy, still used in Louisiana to traverse marshes. He showed Smith a picture. By the time Guravich and Davids returned two years later, Smith had crafted the first Tundra Buggy, a sort of Arctic high rider that allowed occupants to move through snow drifts and over bay ice on huge agricultural tires. From a secure vantage point, occupants could watch and photograph bears. What's more, they could cook and sleep inside, which allowed them to go farther and stay longer. Today, Smith's Tundra Buggy Tours operates six motorized vehicles that can tow two bunkhouse trailers, a dining car, a lounge car, and three utility trailers to campsites at the Cape. This lodge on ice can accommodate as many as 38 guests for tours of up to ten days.

"Dan went through the hard times with me in the early years as I worked to perfect the Tundra Buggies," Smith says. "When we first traveled to the Cape, we had no insulation around the doors. We'd wake in the morning to snow drifts in the buggy, with the foam mats that we slept on frozen to the metal floor. Some of our food supplies would freeze. We lost wheels, broke springs, and busted hydraulic lines." Yet Smith recalls those times as among the best.

In 1980, Guravich met Dr. Ian Stirling, a mammalogist and one of Canada's top polar bear biologists. Stirling and Guravich collaborated in publishing *Polar Bears* (University of Michigan Press, 1988). The first discussion of polar bear zoology for popular audiences, the book remains the benchmark study of the subject.

"In April 1986," Stirling recalls, "Dan came with me to the Beaufort Sea during a few days of crystal-clear arctic weather. There we shared the solitude and the incredible untouched beauty of the sea ice. We saw several

magnificent polar bears ambling along the edges of open leads a hundred miles offshore, seals surfacing in the distance, and pressure ridges glinting in the evening sun. Unlike his Churchill experiences, that trip didn't provide him with any full-frame photos of wild polar bears, but it gave him an opportunity to visit them on the pack ice, a place where few people go. Despite the lack of photographs, Dan loved every minute of it."

From 1980 until the onset of his final illness in 1996, Guravich spent every fall with Len Smith at Cape Churchill, accompanied by scores of photographers, both amateur and professional. The amateurs he and Smith would segregate in their own Tundra Buggies, where Guravich could explain and teach and encourage their passion for polar bears. The professionals—the Barracudas, as he called them—were given their own Tundra Buggy so that they wouldn't intimidate the amateurs. Virtually all the photographs that now appear routinely in the media were obtained at the Cape, as nowhere else in the world does a similar infrastructure exist.

In all, Guravich traveled to the Arctic 75 times, ranging throughout the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and to Alaska, Greenland, Svalbard, and Wrangel Island. He knew the polar bear haunts where he could photograph the bears in safety and comfort.

Over the years, Guravich's efforts brought about a significant improvement in how polar bears were treated. At one time, scientists spray-painted huge identification numbers on bears they had captured, tagged, and released. Photographers were dismayed at having their subjects sullied, but Guravich felt the numbers were demeaning and insulting to the bears, as well. He campaigned to reduce the frequency with which bears are tagged, suggesting that it was unnecessary to capture and tag all the bears in the Arctic to gather scientifically valid statistical information about them. Guravich persuaded researchers to sterilize needles used in darting bears, to avoid transferring blood from one bear to another, and to take sanitary precautions when removing teeth from bears in order to establish age. He was particularly critical of experiments that led to the death of several bears.

For science, Guravich was among the first to provide photographic documentation of polar bear behavior and social interaction, revealing that the animals are not solitary, antisocial loners, as once supposed. Over the years,

his observations helped to ameliorate the public view of the bears. "The public thinks of them as vicious, sneaky killers not worth protecting," he complained to his friend Downs Matthews in 1991. Clearly the legislation that outlawed hunting polar bears, passed by several northern countries in the 1970s, needed to be supplemented with education. Downs suggested that Dan create a forum to provide polar bears with an official spokesperson.

The result was Polar Bears Alive, a nonprofit organization devoted to conserving and promoting the understanding of *Ursus maritimus*, the sea bear or, more commonly, polar bear. Dan eschewed strident forms of conservation, instead preferring to think of himself as a "calm voice" on behalf of polar bears. "Save polar bears," Dan once said, "and you go a long way towards saving the entire habitat of the circumpolar North." A glance at the January 1998 issue of *National Geographic* with its article devoted to the polar bear suggests that Dan's hopes have not been in vain. More than ever, the polar bear seems to be the subject of scientific inquiry and conservationist concern. Dan Guravich's work continues through Polar Bears Alive, P.O. Box 66142, Baton Rouge, LA 70896-6142 USA, and <http://www.polarbearsalive.org>. His photographic achievements can be viewed at <http://www.guravich.com>.

REFERENCES

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